

**ON ALMSGIVING**  
**St. John the Merciful, Archbishop of Alexandria**  
**The Parable of the Good Samaritan**  
**Luke 10:25-37**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**  
**St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY 12189, November 12, 2023**

Today we remember our holy father among the saints John the Merciful, who served in the early part of the seventh century as archbishop of Alexandria. The Greek word for almsgiving, when translated into English, literally means “mercy-giving.” Therefore, St. John is sometimes referred to as “the merciful,” and at other times as “the almsgiver,” both words being synonymous. In his life it is recorded that his “compassion for the poor was measureless and his almsgiving boundless.”<sup>1</sup> Almsgiving, we are taught, erases sins and paves the way for the inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven. Some may say that this concept is quid pro quo. In other words, it is not a generous act but done out of selfish motives, in order to get something in return, namely, we give money to the poor so that we may receive in return the forgiveness of our sins and inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Some may even go so far as to say that this is literally “buying our way into Heaven.” Nothing can be further from the truth. The Christian heart is filled with love, compassion and mercy. Taught by our Savior Jesus Christ Himself, the Christian loves and cares for his neighbor. The heart that is filled with the Holy Spirit can see the face of God in his neighbor, because we are all created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27). Furthermore, the Lord loves each and every one of us so much, saint and sinner alike, Christian and non-Christian, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, and even the atheist, that He said, “as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mat. 25:40). When the Christian sees his neighbor hungry, or lacking proper clothing and freezing in the cold, or living in the street, or suffering from some other need or want, the Christian grieves and suffers in his heart as well. For the Christian heart co-suffers with his neighbor. The Greeks have a word for this — *philotimo*.

When the Christian helps his brother, he is motivated by co-suffering love and mercy. The ultimate example of this is when God saw us perishing and in captivity to the devil. In order to restore us to life and to free us from the bondage of evil, He surrendered His only-begotten Son to suffer and to die for us on the Cross. “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Do these motives sound selfish to you? Human beings are created and hardwired to give to others. Giving to others brings us great joy and happiness, much more than the acquisition of possessions, or any other happiness that we may obtain through earthly pleasures. The forgiveness of sins is a natural result of almsgiving, because grace and love abounds and grows in our hearts when we perform acts of mercy. There is no longer room within our hearts for sin or evil. Another way of looking at it is that forgiveness of sins entails not only asking for forgiveness, but being proactive and working hard to cleanse the darkness from our hearts. Repentance and reconciliation are inseparable from our behaviors and attitudes. The act of almsgiving grows and increases the love, compassion and mercy that we need in order to conquer sin. The love and kindness that we show to others returns to us a hundredfold. “No man is an island”, so the saying goes, and we all need each other. Almsgiving is sort of like a boomerang. The mercy we give returns to us when we need it most, in unexpected, miraculous and supernatural ways. When we show love and mercy to others, love and mercy does not abandon us, but will come back to us as well.

Today's gospel reading is a supreme example of love and care for each other as human beings. The Lord gives us a parable today about a man who is assaulted by robbers and left half dead and bleeding by the roadside. A Jewish priest, one of God's “chosen people,” walks by and does not help the man. A Levite, also one of God's chosen, does likewise and passes by the injured man. A schismatic, a Samaritan man who is not one of God's chosen, who is an outcast and with whom no Jew would have any contact, stops and helps the poor injured

victim. He cleanses the man's wounds and carries the injured man on his own donkey to an inn. He pays the innkeeper to take care of him. Let us not forget that every human being, regardless of nationality culture, religious or political persuasion, is created by the same God. No matter how we treat each other, no matter how we judge each other, whether we like it or not, we are all brothers and sisters, because we all share the same Father in Heaven. We are one species and we all comprise one human race. Humanity is fractured and divided, now more than ever. During the pandemic many people would not even speak to each other and good friends began to hate each other. This division trickled down to the family level and even brother and sister, father and son, etc. became divided and fractured from each other. Instead of protesting and hating each other, wouldn't it be better to try to talk to each other and to try to understand each other? It doesn't mean that we have to agree with each other, but can't we respect each other and learn to live together in peace? No one should ever feel intimidated to say what he thinks or believes. Can't we do that and respect each other, and accept the fact that not everyone thinks and feels the same way that we do? Isn't that a better way than the current trend to cut off and "cancel" those with whom we disagree? Isn't it better to accept people as they are than to hate them because they are different than us? We believe that the Orthodox Church is the true way, yet there are members of our faith who have little love or mercy in their hearts and behave like modern day Pharisees, like the priest and the Levite in today's parable. We can all learn a lesson by observing that there are those of other faiths who shame us by doing a much better job than we do by the mercy and love that they show to their fellow human beings. Must there be endless wars, endless fighting, and endless division? Obviously this is not what God intended when He created the world and created mankind. There will always be different opinions and different religions. We all share one little planet called Earth. When will we learn to share our precious little home together, instead of portraying hatred, judgment and intolerance? When will we learn to live with mutual respect and, dare I say it, with love and compassion for each other? Read the life of St. John the Merciful and learn what it means to love and care for our neighbor. Pete Seeger was a famous folk singer. He was very vocal about what he believed to be right and wrong. However, he also believed that all of us, no matter who or what we are as individuals, and no matter what we believe or don't believe in, we must all learn to live in peace with respect for each other. I am told that before he died, he said that his greatest wish was that people would learn to sing together. Pete was a musician, so it is fitting that he would express his dying sentiment in this way. May we all take that beautiful wish to heart, and as Pete Seeger put it, may we all learn to "sing together." If we all put in a teaspoon of mercy and love, maybe some day that dream will come true. Amen.

---

1. "The Synaxarion - The Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church," Volume Two, November, December, by Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, Holy Convent of the Annunciation of Our Lady Ormylia (Chalkidike), 1999, page 116.